



UNDER DEVELOPMENT

This month a frustrated **David Robinson** brings you tales of woe from America. Who'd have thought it would be so difficult to enter a date into some financial software? Still, at least his phone calls were a bargain

I love things that work first time, every time, no hassle. Sadly, when you mess around with computers a lot you frequently find that what you're using doesn't work first time. So you try to figure it out for an hour or so. Then you call or email the relevant technical support staff, who tell you to read the 89-page Readme file where, if you're lucky you'll find the solution to your problem at the bottom of page 76. If you're not so lucky you spend another hour listening to crappy music on the phone while waiting to talk to yet another person in Calcutta who has as

much chance of solving your problem as winning *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*. Call me an old cynic but, as you should know by now, I've had years of experience of this.

So when Alan pops into my office and gives me a small box containing a phone and asks me to try it, I'm sceptical. It's a USB phone with a setup CD for a service called Skype. I plug it in, install and register the software and set up my ID details for Skype, a sort of Voice over IP phone service/directory. I look for and find Alan's entry in the built-in book, click on the green phone icon

and, whoopee, we can talk. For as long as we like. For free.

I take my laptop and the phone home that night and plug it into my home network. Alan does the same at his house. I call him (no further twiddling necessary) and we can talk. The voice quality is excellent and I'm very impressed.

The phones cost around £29 including VAT, and ours came from www.firebox.com with the Skype software included. It'll take quite a while for the savings we make on local calls to pay for the cost of a phone, and even UK trunk calls are pretty

cheap, but when you start thinking about the cost of international calls, the payback is very quick. A cursory look at BT's business rates revealed the following sample daytime prices per minute:

Place	Price
France and Germany	£0.2419
Iceland	£0.5740
India	£0.5531
Iraq	£1.1165
USA	£0.2010
UK	£1.1508

The last entry I found a bit baffling, but maybe one of you can tell me why an international call to the UK from the UK (is it even possible?) costs over £1 a minute. Anyway, you don't need to be a maths genius to work out that even at the cheapest rate to the USA, you'll recoup the money you paid for the phone in just 144 minutes.

BLIND DATE

So what's the voice quality like when you extend the distance from four miles to 4,000? It just so happened that I was due to visit our client in southern USA the following week, so I'd get a chance to find out. Both servers there were getting rather long



in the tooth, especially the domain controller, which is now about 86 in dog years, and I was going over there to make sure all the mission-critical applications and external access services migrated smoothly. The company also uses Sage's middleweight accounting package and was due an upgrade to the newer MMS package. Resident Sage expert Mrs R came too, both to ensure the proper translation of data to the new version and to train the staff.

You may be wondering why a US company is using accounting software designed for the UK. Well, when we first consulted on this installation it took about 15 minutes to realise that there was nothing special about US accounting requirements. There's no VAT (lucky sods) so you just turn off those features and, other than the fact that Americans use slightly different terminology (such as accounts receivable instead of sales ledger), it works in exactly the same way. The advantage to the UK parent company is that the accounts department in the UK head office can use the same software everywhere, saving a lot of time, effort and fuss.

The server swap went swimmingly, as did the accounting system upgrade – until they tried to pay a supplier. The accountant tried to create a cheque payment and entered the date in the American style of 4/11/2005, meaning 11th April. Sage MMS spat out its dummy and without any warning reversed the month and date to read 11/04, which on a system that uses US date conventions is 4th November. That's seven months in the future, and MMS says that's not allowed and won't accept the date. So you can't pay the supplier. If you don't pay people when you're supposed to, they tend to sue you and you go out of business.

The really strange part was that if you typed in a date that couldn't be reversed, such as 4/13/2005, MMS accepted it. It was only dates where the month and day could both be reversed and remain valid that it swapped. What to do? We suggested, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, not paying anybody before the thirteenth day of each month but I can report with authority that the American sense of humor (sic) ain't up to our standards, so that was a no-no.

TECH UNSUPPORTED

It was time to sample the delights of Sage's technical support. Sage still runs this from its not inconsiderable base in Newcastle, having resisted the temptation to save lots of money and outsource it to India. Anxious not to run up a fortune in phone bills, we used what had by now been

REVIEW BOOK OF THE MONTH

Surviving PC Disasters, Mishaps and Blunders

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £21 (£15.74 from

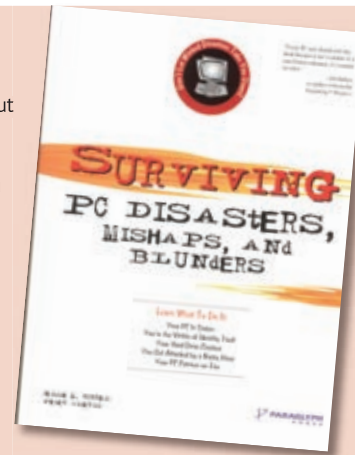
www.compman.co.uk)

ISBN 1932111980

Regular readers of this column will need no persuading that using a PC or, even worse, a network of them is a disaster waiting to happen. Indeed, in this book's introduction, one paragraph is headed "If it ain't broke it soon will be". And, as I know only too well, many users are pretty helpless, hapless and hopeless when things go wrong (thank goodness).

Although I run the risk of doing myself out of a job, I recommend this title to you – especially if you know you're anything like the people I've just mentioned. Authors Torres and Sideris have deliberately kept the style and language as simple as possible considering the subject matter, so if you're a geek or techno-snob it will all be beneath you.

You don't have to read the entire book to get any benefit, as



each chapter has been written to stand on its own, which is great for those with a low attention span. Chapters range from preventing and dealing with data, identity and hardware theft to hardware, software and network failures, internet fraud, viruses and malware (note how

the authors distinguish between the latter pair), backups, recovery and restoration and, finally, the dangers of piracy. For further details go to www.compman.co.uk and type the ISBN into the search box.

christened the Batphone to call Alan for free and he, in turn, would speak with Sage. The conversation he relayed to us went something like this:

"MMS is not recommended for use outside the UK"

"But why does it change some dates and not others?"

"MMS is not recommended for use outside the UK"

"Any chance of you changing the way it handles these reversing dates?"

"MMS is not recommended for use outside the UK"

"We'll take that as a no, then"

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The silver lining in all this was that while the content of the call was rubbish, the quality of the phone call transmission was superb.

We had to decide what to do. One option, although unwelcome, was to undo the upgrade and revert to the old software and data, but that would mean forgoing the lovely new features and being out of step with the UK office. It would take only 10 minutes using one of the 33 backups Mrs R does when performing any upgrade (she doesn't need this month's book of the month). When using the old software, you had to use UK date formats as it hadn't the faintest idea about international settings. The US staff were quite used

to entering dates 'backwards' into Sage. So we created a new user for each staff member using MMS and set their international settings to UK (all users compute on the same server/computer as it's a terminal services setup) so we now have sagesusan, sagewendy and so on. When we tried it, lo and behold, all the dates worked correctly. The only remaining question was whether the users with 'odd' settings would survive a server reboot with the variant date configuration intact? We got everybody off the application server and rebooted both it and the domain

controller. Thankfully, the settings stayed as they should be.

Further conversations with a Sage mole revealed that the strange date behaviour is something to do with compatibility with online banking, but why this would affect only dates before the thirteenth day in any month is beyond me – if anyone out there knows why, I'd be more than grateful for an explanation.

CHEAP AND CHEERFUL

My love of hassle-free products was further fulfilled when I used the latest version of Serif's WebPlus (version 9.0) to create a prototype of a new website for the Americans. Serif is a master of mail order selling and often

uses the ploy of selling 'slightly out of date' software (a couple of versions back from the current one) at really low prices as a way of netting new users. If you've received one of its flyers but been sceptical about whether anything that cheap is any good, suspend your suspicion. It's like getting a loaf from the bargain shelf at Asda. All the very cheap products I've had from Serif have been OK at the very least. If you pay full price – which is still pretty cheap – for the current versions then it's very good indeed. I use PagePlus 10 to create all our brochures and, while I could also use that to output web pages, WebPlus 9 is even better at making mincemeat of preparing a 26-page site with drop-down menus for navigation. And I didn't write a single word of HTML as it's all completely WYSIWYG.

WebPlus has no web commerce features, but then so does Microsoft's FrontPage and that costs a lot more than the £60 Serif charges. What's more, WebPlus is much easier to use. It even offers a money back guarantee if you don't like the product (although the website doesn't shout about it too loudly) so you really have no reason for not buying British.

Finally this month, while waiting for my flight home I was called to the check-in desk. "Would you mind if we upgrade you to first class?" I was asked. Is the Pope Catholic? If only I could get them to do that first time, every time, no hassle. ☑

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